LISTEN

A Review of Poetry
and Criticism
Edited by
GEORGE HARTLEY

Anthony Thwaite
John Holloway
Kingsley Amis
Gordon Wharton
Alan Brownjohn
Donald Davie
Fergus Allen
John Miles
W. S. Merwin
Richard Selig
Philip Larkin on
W. H. AUDEN
Charles Madge on
WILLIAM EMPSON

Vol. 2 No. 1 2/-

CONTENTS

		Page
HOME TRUTHS	Anthony Thwaite	1
AT THE *NOH*		2
WHO IS THE MUSE	John Holloway	2
MIGHTIER THAN THE PEN	Kingsley Amis	3
IGNORANCE	Philip Larkin	4
THE ROUNDABOUT	Gordon Wharton	4
POETS TO READERS	Alan Brownjohn	5
THE PURITAN TO THE STATESMAN		6
OBITER DICTA	Donald Davie	7
A TROPICAL CARESS	Fergus Allen	8
TOWNSMAN IN THE COUNTRY		9
TRIBUTE TO METAPHYSICIANS	John Miles	9
CHACONNE: THE TELL-TALE HEART		10
THE WEDDING	Vernon Scannell	10
A PORTRAIT	James Simmons	11
THE JOURNEY	Peter Ferguson	11
VILLANELLE	James Harrison	12
THE RIVAL	George Hartley	12
TOAD	W. S. Merwin	14
RUINS	Richard Selig	16
ORESTES		16
A PALTRY THING'	Tommy MacGloin	17
Books		
EMPSON AGONISTES	Charles Madge	19
NO MORE FEVER	Philip Larkin	22
EBB TIDE	Ovid Topham	26
PREPARING THE PICNIC	Harold Silver	27

Cover design by Chenapan

Subscription rates in the U.K.: 2/2 per single copy; annual subscription 8/-; both post free. All MSS. and subscriptions to: The Editor, LISTEN, THE MARVELL PRESS, 253 Hull Road, HESSLE, East Yorkshire.

In the U.S.A.: 50 cents per single copy; annual subscription 2 dollars; both post free.

All foreign subscriptions sent direct to LISTEN must be in the form of International Money Orders.

LISTEN

EDITED BY GEORGE HARTLEY

Business Manager: *Jean Hartley*

Volume Two Summer 1956 Number One

HOME TRUTHS

Anthony Thwaite

Wishing this home makes home. A tough
Campaigner sneers at cosiness,
But I was never harsh enough
To make my bed of flimsier stuff
Or be content with less and less.

I show my charity to those who bear
The honourable wounds they won
In poverty's dishonour, yet can't wear
That blear campaigner's crutches, share
The hunger of oblivion.

A decent roof should look obscene
Under the railway-arch. The moon
Tells different tales to those who've been
Her night companions; and they've seen
That Orpheus knows another tune.

Not ' Home Sweet Home ', which is banal,
Yet certain all the same, a place
Where nothing furious can fall
And tear me from a sheltering wall
And show a leering, vagrant face.

Homeward I go, secure in this:
Nothing can alter this at least,
This house, this home, these certainties
Which shut out, with calm thoroughness,
The beggar, thief, and homeless beast.

AT THE *NOH*

Anthony Thwaite

This is the play. Masked enemy, masked friend
Meeting so slowly, slowly storm and rage.
Hand moves to fan. The swords are all concealed.
All eyes but mine move on the speaking page,
Anticipating what they know — the end
When all are dead, or all are reconciled.

I do not know the language: if I did,
Would all be clear? Would gesture be a voice
Telling me she was angry, he was glad?
This discipline allows no random choice.
All grace and knowledge is inherited
From what our fathers did and what they said.

But words confuse. I do not know the words
Yet somehow feel a meaning must be somewhere.
Move on. The parley stops: the chorus wails —
In grief? To point the moral? And I stare
Deeper into the centre, where the tides
Shoal into darkness, words fail, and meaning fails.

The simple answer is I do not know
What words and action mean. Their fathers spoke
And so they understand. But I, a child
Without a father, falter without book,
Ignorant and bored, going before I know
If all will die, or all be reconciled.

WHO IS THE MUSE

John Holloway

How can my hate prevail until
It's in a tongue so rich and bare,
So much like gold, so much like steel,
That everyone who reads will swear
No poet can have ever tried
The span of that strong speech before?
But I shall fling a gate back wide
Without a warning, and in a trice
The flame of hate shall break and pour
Out fierce as lava; sharp as ice.

Yet where I hate, I needs must fear.
Then let fear too stand forth: and fall
Into a focus, bright and clear,
Shadow-black-sharp against a wall,
Caught in the poems dazzling beam,
A beam of light: no lava-flow
Or shattered sheet of ice that stream
Shall run by now, but smooth as milk;
Hate's, fear's harsh igneous outcrop grow
Green leaves, for silk-worms, and for silk.

Yet, silk of banished pain is spun
Out of one single substance, Love.
Therefore from all I turn to one
Who clean outflies falcon, and dove;
A winged muse: there I draw
What keeps all poems safe from harm,
Illustrious vernacular:
And where my fear and hate were rife
For one she lends the doctor's balm,
For the other, lends his knife.

MIGHTIER THAN THE PEN Kingsley Amis

Jerking and twitching as he walks,
Neighing and hooting as he talks,
The shabby pundit's prototype,
Smoking his horrible black pipe,
Balbus keeps making me feel ill.
I've heard art's a kind of pill
To purge your feelings, so I'll try
And catch him in my camera's eye,
Transcribe him down to the last hair,
Ambered, though neither rich nor rare.

But will my interests be served
By having such a sod preserved?
Is art much better than a drug,
To cure the man but spare the bug?
And, gentle reader, why should you
Be led vicariously to spew?
Cameras just click, and a click's not
The sound of an effective shot;
Fussing with flash and tripod's fun,
But bang's the way to get things done.

IGNORANCE — Philip Larkin

Strange to know nothing, never to be sure
Of what is true or right or real,
But forced to qualify *or so I feel,*
Or *Well, it does seem so;*
Someone must know.

Strange to be ignorant of the way things work:
Their skill at finding what they need,
Their sense of shape, and punctual spread of seed,
And willingness to change;
Yes, it is strange,

Even to wear such knowledge (for our flesh
Surrounds us with its own decisions),
And yet spend all our lives on imprecisions,
That when we start to die
Have no idea why.

THE ROUNDABOUT — Gordon Wharton

Through marvellous careers these animals
Are constantly renewed, repaired. I know
One does get broken or begin to fade,
Sometimes not caring if the thing does show.

And the machinery too sometimes breaks down;
We grumble at the works. If they conveyed
Anything once, well, then they seem to be
More intricate the more they are displayed.

But the contraption working is a treat;
I hardly feel it moving. You may see
(Sharing it as you do) its creatures race
At decent intervals and not agree.

But at the centre here the music starts
And I can almost recognise your face
In all the lights and colours. It depends
So much on them, of course, and on the place.

Then it is seeing ostriches grow manes.
Speed is the factor there; for there it blends
Lions and birds, and more than half explains
The lovely gadgets at our finger-ends.

POETS TO READERS

Alan Brownjohn

The autumn is where spiders clamber in
Over cracked sills; is not those golden lawns
Where kings and queens and lovers quit the dance
That summer was, and let their garments fall
(Discarded for a mellower resonance)
Back into vacant folds upon the wall.

It is not one wide bitter-sweet decay
Which ruins trees and drags the evenings near,
But a resigned assumption of its parts:
A clustering of detail which the air
About November streets confronts you with
For signs that August is no longer here:

Abandoned webs on privets sag with dew;
A subtle damp is starting underfoot;
The freshness of one day bequeaths a mist
To its successor; a sunlit, resolute sky
Hardens its face and brings a sharper rain;
Dry winds leave moisture in the hurrying eye.

Autumn ' entailed all this, and yet kept out,
In all its bold simplicity, the sense
Of most of these things. One large word said nearly
Everything needed; and you read, and lost
The heart of every season, overlooking
All these small essences that matter most.

Our labour, once, was easier; instead
Of piecemeal fragments building up a truth
We used the one vague (but impressive) word.
' Autumn ' sought out and stirred the widest pain,
And though we now disdain such facile uses
Would it be hard to play you false again?

THE PURITAN TO THE STATESMAN

Alan Brownjohn

Cities must have their vices; so you make
Concession to the worst in us by leaving
Most of their vast intransigence untouched.
Your police parade blind-eyed the nightly streets
As guardians of a peace which covers vice,
Condoning by feigned ignorance a ritual
No longer bad so much as commonplace,
Stark wickedness turned jaded and habitual.

Permitting this is partly patronage
And wisdom, partly; patronage because
You feel this is a monster to be fed
By such kind laxity; and you are wise
In that you guess the dangers of restraint,
And here your foresight cleverly reduces
The raging beast to manageable size
If vice, instead of politics, seduces.

You argue: 'This is merely facing facts.
Where you cut down one sin another grows.
Such cankers on the body politic
Can be allowed to waste one weaker limb,
They do no actual harm except to those
Already far too wasted to be cured.'
You thus, regrettably, accept it as
A lesser evil that is best endured.

This reasoning I blame you for, as worse
Than any careless tolerance of wrong,
Because it finds a partial virtue where
Whole evil thrives. Nature expelled recurs,
But harbouring her is worse. I am appalled
That you should opt for Hell, which is devised
Not for the weak who tried and failed, but those
Who, noting such things, shrugged and compromised.

OBITER DICTA

Donald Davie

Trying to understand myself, I fetch
My father's image to me. There he is, augmenting
The treasury of his prudence with a clutch
Of those cold eggs, Great Truths — his scrivener's hand
Confiding apothegms to his pocket book.
Does mine do more than snap the elastic band
Of rhyme about them? In an age that teaches
How pearls of wisdom only look like eggs,
The tide, afflatus, still piles up on the beaches
The pearls he prizes, the stones that he retrieves
Misguidedly from poetry's undertow,
Deaf to the harsh retraction that achieves
Its scuttering backwash, ironies. And yet,
Recalling his garrulity, I see
There's method in it. Seeming to forget
The point at issue, the palmer tells his beads,
Strung by connections nonchalantly weak
Upon the thread of argument he needs
To bring them through his fingers, round and round,
Tasting of gristle, savoury; and he hears,
Like rubbing stones, their dry conclusive sound.

Himself an actor (He can play the clown),
He knows the poet's a man of parts; the sage
Is one of them, buffoonery like his own,
Means to an end. So, if he loves the page
That grows sententious with a terse distinction,
Yet lapidary moralists are dumb
About the precepts that he acts upon,
Brown with tobacco from his rule of thumb.

'Not bread but a stone!' — the deep-sea fishermen
Denounce our findings, father. Pebbles, beads,
Perspicuous dicta, gems from Emerson,
Whatever stands when all about it slides,
Whatever in the oceanic welter
Puts period to unpunctuated tides,
These, that we like, they hate. And after all, for you,
To take but with a pinch of salt to take
The maxims of the sages is the true
Great Truth of all. To keep, as you would say,
A sense of proportion, I should portion out

The archipelago across the bay,
One island to so much sea. Assorted
Poetic pleasures come in bundles then,
Strapped up by rhyme, not otherwise supported?

Turning about his various gems to take
Each other's lustre by a temperate rule,
He walks the graveyard where I have to make
Not centos but inscriptions, and a whole
That's moved from inward, dancing. Yet I trace
Among his shored-up epitaphs my own:
Art, as he hints, turns on a commonplace,
And Death is a tune to dance to. cut in stone.

A TROPICAL CARESS

Fergus Allen

Cardiac music over all —
The sea, the shelly sand, the rocks —
Bleeds from a stationary car.

Silent among the dozing palms,
Two (to be lovers), linking, thinking,
Advance upon the littoral.

To him then for consideration:
Downswept hair, and upswept neck
Stemming from naked shoulder;

And tinted mouth from which issues
Small sophisticated bird-voice;
And rustle of accoutrements.

Now music is truly background;
A species of desire affects
The singer in the shiny box.

Turning at tideline, face to face,
The endearments flag — and could
They? Yes probably, yes, they think

That not impossible and
(Stand clear of the irony)
Kiss, kiss in the warm latitude.

TOWNSMAN IN THE COUNTRY Fergus Allen

Can he have disregarded all these nights
Her invitation, her implicit presence;
Have ignored or misunderstood the trees
Signalling wildly from a windy ridge?
What can justify his nocturnal tremor,
The attention he pays to minute noises,
Creatures abroad, the leaves requesting silence?
What does he think is walking on the roof?
To what conclusion was he led at nightfall
Hearing a small scream issue from a wood?
What lies behind his nonchalant departure,
His travel to the place where she is absent?
Can he feel gay in his electric city,
Safer among his engines and his shadows?

TRIBUTE TO METAPHYSICIANS John Miles

Although your mark decisive on the sky
As a new constant on an empty board
Trails down from luminous to fainter cloud,
Telling no observer where you meant to fly,

And when your blacked out mind hops hooded round
The peaks you sense through inferential night
It's daylight on the airfield and the note
Of the engine's an enclosed, a testing, sound,

The staff will let you up the fatal tower.
Locals who saw the madman hit the field
Still do not speak of proving flights that failed:

Proud of machines in huge symbolic power
Taking off unmanned towards infinity,

And red tomatoes through unbroken dreams
Acquiring redness in transparent frames

Though loud poetic bangs are lost at sea.

CHACONNE: THE TELL-TALE HEART

John Miles

The means are so perfectly rational. As for the end,
In the distinctive silence you intend
You'll gain acceptance as the old man's friend.

Keep saying what it was about the eye
Self-evident of someone who must die
Glaring imperative as open sky;

The taunting whole that made you kill the part
Was here or here, but then you heard the heart.
Nothing would move, but then you heard it start

And now the heart turns evidence of guilt
More madly buried since no blood was spilt,
The floorboards creaked before the house was built,

And nothing now must let the calm descend
As kindly as the voice of a lying friend
Calling the silence the means, knowing the silence the end.

But the lantern opens by another notch.
The hissing of a snake you only scotch
Is like enough the ticking of a watch.

Night after night you'll tear apart the floor;
Call the police: they answer Nevermore:
The silence is not the end it was before.

THE WEDDING

Vernon Scannell

The white flower of his love grew in the shade
Of cypress and was nourished by forlorn
And haunting arias of birds afraid
Of that bright dark, the clarion murderous dawn.

The moon, diseased and beautiful, approved his choice
Of meadow saffron, wolf's-bane and the silver blade
He gave to her he loved. At last her voice
Murmured that consent for which he'd prayed.

But she insisted on a long engagement,
And well before the wedding day drew near
He wept at what the darkening cage of age meant:
His tender love changed into tremulous fear.

The date could not be cancelled, but instead
Of coloured paper snow the salt rain fell;
And he, pale groom, already in her bed
Heard not the measured tolling of the bell.

A PORTRAIT

James Simmons

In the condemned cell he slept all night
Who in his heart dreaded a late reprieve,
Selecting the security of a limited known world
With power to regulate his failure and select a pose
Where he was God within a perfect place
Within the world of others; and there he kept
A heart maintained with locusts and the honey
Of amazing words, the delicately featured
Comb, a dome of many coloured fancies
That stick or stirring finger can destroy
When love like a little boy goes ranging.
For years he lived thus; but natural laws
Penetrate prisons, the bars and bricks depend
And decay within them. Love amnesty granted
Leading him out into the grey day
The unremarkable content of common places.

THE JOURNEY

Peter Ferguson

We leave by night. Here, where we used to live,
This land, already half remembered, seems
A world wound in reverse, a negative
Of days transposed into recurring dreams.

Iron pulse of pistons, thrum of wheels; outside,
A silent sequence uniformly reeled
Towards and past us, landmarks, lights that ride
In column down our eyes' magnetic field.

We watch the outcast cities hover near,
Draw level with us, falter disaligned,
Then, each in turn dispatched, slip by and steer
To where they merge their separate stars behind.

At journey's end another world is ranged,
Restored to wholeness by night's alchemy,
So that we do not see it as unchanged,
Nor recognise it as our memory.

VILLANELLE

James Harrison

It is ourselves that are the first to go
Where the intention was that others should;
We draw the pin and then forget to throw.

With plans to let the not-so-loved one know
Next week, perhaps, she stands not where she stood,
It is ourselves that are the first to go.

Who, putting anger by awhile to grow,
Are swindled by some trivial act of good,
We draw the pin and then forget to throw.

Quietly contemptuous at a show
Of eager hands, we'd have it understood
It is ourselves that are the first to go.

In search of whom to blame for each new blow
And proud to think it is no less than God,
We draw the pin and then forget to throw.

Three wishes that were squandered long ago
We should refuse now in all likelihood:
It is ourselves that are the first to go;
We draw the pin and then forget to throw.

THE RIVAL

George Hartley

For it is love that I am seeking for,
But of a beautiful, unheard-of kind
That is not in the world.

W. B. Yeats

Years later then, we found we'd altered fate,
Betrayed by smiles an actor's easy tears,
We married wisely but perhaps too late.

To adapt the ideal too hard to bear,
Now kindly blurred by memory, but apt
At times, to more than sharpen our despair,

That what in dreams is simple, are commands,
Imprisoned only by their own conviction,
Eyes may communicate, but not the hands.

So what-might-have-been is now affection
That the old ghost may make no difference
And grow like you, who need never mention

No absence is admitted by a sense
That coined a touching synonym for love;
Now our nostalgia gives a sad response

Constructs from woodsmoke, memories to move
Us from contentment of the blind and dumb
To follow the unlikely look, and prove

Such legends of the simple thing, become
The meaning which will make all words absurd,
Lull to a silence that may trick the tongue,

To answer questions that were never heard,
From dreams in which you had no other voice
But that of your hated rival I preferred.

For taking for granted the random chance,
Wanting what we got, sly fate commended
Refined acceptance so it seemed a choice

Of the cherished image ever altered;
Beautiful from a dream, the only love
And always wished-for, never remembered.

TOAD

W. S. Merwin

The night squats with that jewel in its forehead
About which so much has been bruited.
We are afraid of the darkness; its hide sweats;
Streams run from it suddenly, startled, splashing
Invisibly. We say it is harmless
But believe strange things of it also: who
Touches it will be tainted
With its own complexion, maybe mortally;
And who, at some hour, has not touched it? None
Can see where its splayed hands are rooted
In rank shadow, none can say when its tongue
Will leap. Its eyes are secret, but surely unblinking.
None can hear the songs that are said
To circle in the pit of its mind. All day it sits
Just beyond the light, showing how shallow
The day is, and the undersides
Of the dazzling stones, how unphased their dampness,
How secure in their cold, turned always away: they need not
Be builded to be a temple to it.
All our lives we watch but can never tell
The motion of it, but daylong
We know its approach, until the light is gone
And it is there. And only
Ourselves besides. We, we that make
The world in our own image, why can we not
Unmake this? We deny it. Neither
That night-sweat is venom, nor the startled streams.
And for the jewel, darkness dissembles it
And day disproves it: it is dead bone only
And things most natural turn it
Their natural ways; it secretes no influence.
Why, then, do we hold it in horror, who can construct
No logic for our loathing? The world is our image.
What is there within us that we
Deny, deny, yet tell tales of, yet shudder at,
Yet cannot explain, yet invoke to excuse
Errors and worse; what, turned always away
As though into a temple deeper
Than any light? There in the dark aversion
Of our minds we feed it, and ourselves delight
In its fatness. Its nature
Is gentle and does most affect us;

Its appearance only we name not our own,
Keeping our faces from it and our eyes
From recognition of it, and a fair mask for it weaving
All the blond day, out of choicest things.
(Only naked it revolts and affrights us,
As only in recognising and naming it
Ours, might we see our veritable
Beauty there). And it would give us means
To murder to preserve it, to destroy
Ourselves if need were. In its forehead
We say a jewel is, of great properties.
And surely from that image of
What we are, there is a water comes:
Pain provokes it; fear fetches it forth;
The beast taken up in the hand and with a straw pricked,
You can catch the liquor in a vessel.
It is bitter, and there is no antidote nor balm.
And who can blame the creature, though the poison
Eat from all actions their live colours,
Killing them white, though it corrode with good reason
The inexcusable blood of what we are,
To save the beast in its comfort? Who
Can blame the simple jewel in its
Delusive sovereignty, yet who
Can comprehend it, or who dare excuse it?
Though we say that the stars sing where it goes,
They hide from its presence. One side turned
At all times away from us, out of that
Dear stone, by minute ways but without
Fail, there wells to our need always
The potent water of justification.
A thimbleful in a flagon of ale can kill a king.

RUINS

Richard Selig

That citadel was crushed, where princes bathed and bred,
By patient weather, hoofs of sheep; by weeds, the wild
Anemone; by poor, dirt-breaking men, their seed
So numerous it rots the stone and plants the child;
By slack and secret water, roots of olive trees;
By mincing scrape of tourists sucking like bees

Their ruined portion from an ancient treasury.
Dispelled from roofless chambers, that lethal vanity,
Those legends buzz in the brain like locusts suddenly.
One sees the sky, how the light falls, where mountains lie,
Knowing the view was similar when the great ones die.

Between the human and the inhuman, between charged womb
And raging clouds; scuffed shoe, tumbled column,
Potsherds and bones and that cold law beyond the tomb
Diminishing man's dignity, ignoring him —
The Cyclopean is too small, too soft and loose,
To last out change of weather or of use.

ORESTES

Richard Selig

What grave at midnight opens, what prophecy comes true,
What dark mouth opening under a bare bough?
The long lean tomb of a tall man, taller than life,
Of Agamemnon's son whose glory, stained on a knife,
Still shines with crime's renewal, Abel's death, your wish.
Those ancient bones will tell you: feeble was the leash
Tethering the righteous man from the unrighteous act.
What law his mind was tethered to, his heart had lacked.

Cassandra saw and prophesied: beneath the friendly mask
Lay the king's death, the queen's lust, the lover's obscene risk.
Mycenae's stone received the blunt fall of heads
And choking streams of blood, but never any sorrow sheds;
For witnessing such crimes cannot disturb its sleep.

Yet stones can dream, blood can dry, and mortal reap
From dreaming stone the shattered moment of his death.
Because the good Orestes came — straight as youth
Seeks out its noblest aptitude — to find the dark house
That bred him, he doomed his strength into a bitter cause.

Step by step the story when retold retells
How peace is paid for crime by crime. Blood falls
Repeatedly in seasons: history is one great year
In which a liturgy of violent acts, deep fear,
Wronged innocence recurs as do the seasons' storms
And man is never safe from harms and doing harm.

'A PALTRY THING' — Tommy MacGloin

One who is old and yellow came to me
Complaining often of the height of stair,
Tight suck, and of such indelicacy
In taking or in rising from a chair
Or with a calf-tongue, lapping saucer-tea
And of the mule-kick bite and pinch in air.
All these and more as June sun-breezes blow
But spoke another from core of shadow,
' Nature's churned and turned and left a bitter tallow

' Well might he roar, who was imputed round
The Grecian Bend, that ' Might is Right ' if might
In mind. Nor is he whelped who has not found
The string and bricks of that Japanic rite,
To Cold and those with breast against the mound,
It bends a back and proffers chair to slight.
What called the Wanderer back to a smoulder
In the fires of kin, set ash on shoulder
But prick-thoughts of sin against the Wise though older?

' Wise, golden droppings of a sanded age,
That corner sun and in their green hold sway
By blind-eye fancy or by muscled rage
Of iron mind and might — all have their day,
The asses day, until those (with courage
Of a snake or with quite a bit to say
For Devil) with a knack for timely use,
Pitch all inside a ditch, daft odd boots
Not worth a scratch or some skin-tinker's toe-abuse.

' To nail a hat, a frenzied ghost night-flits
Beyond at Callow by Old Mickey's Rock;
Lank Dooney, when the dowried man took hitch
To set her tooth and craw, was driven soft,
A balming daughter then a learish bitch
Wormed out his mind, egged him on to mock
Poor Peter's prank across the bottom lake;
With lamp lit, to reeding of a corncrake,
Mad Lank walked on and in and left a hat to wake.

Thricefold, I say, an old man dies then on,
Lies scuttered white in body, mind and soul
So we are kind to son and to his son,
Being mindful,each, of the dole
And of ourselves and of Time's Omicron,
But He's no stick with heart of thought-full role.
' A paltry thing ', ' A paltry thing ', so cried
Our lairey Willie on Ben Bulben's side
For whom a full and fat, fair hundred ladies sighed!'

EMPSON AGONISTES

Collected Poems, William Empson. (Chatto, 10/6.)

It is not surprising that a younger generation should like these admirable poems, many of them from William Empson's first volume published twenty years ago, and written during the ten years before that. Their effect as virtuoso pieces is dazzling, and induces imitation. But while their style is superficially imitable, their mood of problem solving is not the mood of poets under forty. A re-reading of them suggests a number of questions. What sort of problems is Empson trying to solve? Does poetry offer a medium for solving them? In what sense does the poet arrive at solutions? It is possible that in raising these questions in relation to Empson, we are also implying that recent poets have been avoiding such questions and avoiding the 'problem' aspect of the poem. This may or may not be a right and suitable attitude for them to take up, but if one is to enter thoroughly into the Empsonian poetic one must be willing to accept the seriousness of his own working assumptions.

The underlying problem for Empson is, of course, to define the contemporary function of poetry itself. This is in line with the exciting inquiries of I. A. Richards into the nature of language, and especially the language of poetry. Empson was not only a pupil of Richards at Cambridge but has pursued analytical inquiries of his own which show critical originality of the highest order. The poetic impulse, however, we may be sure, preceded the analysis. There is no doubt that Empson was a poet before he was a critic. Some of the pieces in his *Collected Poems* were, I believe, written while he was still at school, and they are already characteristic in style and subject matter. It was, indeed, the development of a style to suit the subject matter which dictated Empson's poet's progress, and which drove him deeply into criticism and semantics.

In the earlier poems, therefore, it is natural enough that Empson should have regarded this 'problem of poetry' as a technical problem, and one which was to be solved impersonally, as the problems of science are solved (or are supposed to be solved). Cambridge in the 'twenties was at the high-water-mark of scientific virtuosity, with scientists for the first time enjoying the kind of esteem reserved in the past for artists and philosophers. The Cambridge magazine *Experiment* embodies this radicalism of the artist-scientist, and its most eloquent manifesto was I. A. Richards' essay *Science and Poetry.*

Any positivist formulation of a 'function' for poetry is likely to fall short, and, on the whole, Empson and Richards avoid having to make one. Richards, for example, seeks aid in some 'untranslatable' terms from Confucius. This is to define poetry in terms of more poetry; and this is, in fact, probably as far as one can go. The implied statement in the early Empson poems is therefore, to put it baldly, that the relation between the human and the non-human, the poetic and the scientific, the spiritual and the material, the personal and the impersonal, is so subtle that it evaporates in prose but can, in a sense, be expressed in poetry.

Yet it is only metaphorically that poetry can be considered as performing so cognitive a function as expressing a relation. What it really does is to express an attitude towards exploring the relation. The function of poetry, therefore, is to express, and perhaps promote, the attitudes and motives of the explorers.

If this is accepted, one can see how well it fits into the range of subject matter in the early poems. In each one there are items from the following frames of reference. Firstly and most obviously references from science itself — especially from astro-physics and physiology, because of their bearing on the ancient themes of man's relation to the universe, and the soul's relation to the body. Secondly, references from the poetic tradition; sometimes in the shape of quotations — from Shakespeare, Milton, Pope; sometimes by borrowings of style — from Donne, Marvell and Hopkins. Thirdly, references from the contemporary scene — underground trains, tooth paste, Douglas Fairbanks: it was this capacity to assimilate the non-traditional which F. R. Leavis applauded more than twenty years ago.

A fourth frame of reference, of a more personal and directly emotional kind, appears in some but not all the poems in the first volume, especially in the five *Letters,* and (in a magnificent fusion with all the others) in *Bacchus*. It takes a powerful private emotion to drive so cerebral a poet to the limit of his creativeness and to attain the full audacity of desperation. 'Verse likes despair', in the words of another poem, and again, in *This Last Pain*:

> Imagine, then, by miracle, with me,
> (Ambiguous gifts, as what gods give must be)
> What could not possible be there,
> And learn a style from a despair.

In each of the last three verses of *Bacchus* the word 'despair' is hammered at. At the back of the word is probably a reference to the quotation from *Paradise Lost*: 'Our final hope is flat despair'. In the note to *Bacchus,* Empson says of these final verses: 'After this look-round of the subject I try to present a person feeling tragic exultation in it'. It is as well to remember the element of exultation in Empson's despair:

> This last pain for the damned the Fathers found:
> 'They knew the bliss with which they were not crowned'.
> Such, but on earth, let me foretell,
> Is all, of heaven or of hell.

Of the first four verses of *Bacchus,* we read in the note: "The notion is that life involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis; e.g., those of philosophy, which apply to all creatures, and the religious one about man being both animal and divine. Drink is taken as typical of this power [i.e., maintaining oneself between contradictions] because it makes you more outgoing and unselfcritical, able to do it more heartily — e.g., both more witty and more sentimental'.

Alcohol, strong personal feelings, the exultation of despair, these release the poet from his inhibitions, painful as this release may be: 'What strength or wisdom the drink gives comes through disturbing you'. Compare this with a note to the fine early poem *Sea Voyage*: 'Man himself in the tortures of his spirituality becomes the red rag that he can hold out, as in making a bull charge, to catch the power of the sea-horses'. These self-inflicted 'tortures' are the motive force of the earlier poetry, locked as they are in sometimes excessive obscurity of style, as in *Plenum and Vacuum*:

> From infant screams the eyes' blood-gorged veins
> Called ringed orbiculars to guard their balls;
> These stays squeeze yet eyes no relief ensanguines,
> These frowns, sphincter, void-centred, burst wrinkled, hold-alls.

Expression so costive as this argues a painful inner experience, too painful to be all let out. At a rational level, the verse is developing a theme in comparative anatomy taken, I think, from Darwin's *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. In the words of Empson's note: 'The screaming fit is supposed to be abandoned by civilised people, so that the machinery of facial expression depends on a central reality no longer present.' It is necessary to stress this 'tortured' aspect of the poetry at a time when younger poets are borrowing the formal elegance of Empson's poetry. In his case, but not in theirs, the elegance is used to 'contain' a violent struggle, an all-out effort of emotion and intellect to confront the most desperate problems. In *Bacchus* the problem solving has been lifted right out of the 'technical' plane by a strong tension of person-to-person, comparable to that of Donne with his mistress or of Hopkins with God.

A fifth frame of reference, almost deliberately excluded from the earlier poems, is that of politics, which come up increasingly in the later ones. The references are to politics and geography combined; perhaps one should say they belong to geo-politics. Just as a personal emotion released the poetry of *Bacchus*, so the poet's explicit pre-occupation with world-political events is linked with his experiences in the Far East and his viewpoint is the more Olympian and global because it takes in the massive importance of China, a country in which he, along with Richards, had been teaching before the war, and to which he returned and taught for five years after the war. By a sympathetic reading of the poems called *China* and *Autumn on Nan-Yueh* and the notes that go with them, one can enter into something of that curious mixture of detachment and involvement that is the Empsonian attitude to Far-Eastern politics. 'I felt that while I was trying to help China I need not be solemn about her'. 'It seemed no use pretending I had anything to say about proletarianism'. The long, discursive *Autumn on Nan-Yueh* is explicit on this to the point of doggerel:

> Politics are what verse should
> Not fly from, or it goes all wrong,
> I feel the force of that all right,

And had I speeches they were song.
But really, does it do much good
To put in verse however strong
The welter of a doubt at night
At home, in which I too belong?

I do not feel the same fusion of references in the later poems as in the *Letters* and *Bacchus*, nor the same consistency in trying to solve the poem-problem in terms of the medium itself. The self-questioning about 'escape' is only intermittently poetic; some of its phrases, e.g., 'Economists have got the bird' are reminiscent of clues in a *Times* crossword puzzle, not intended to bring the imagination into play. This is no doubt a form of self-denial on the poet's part and it is all rather sadly summed up in a short poem near the end of the volume, called *Let it go*:

It is this deep blankness is the real thing strange.
The more things happen to you the more you can't
Tell or remember even what they were.

The contradictions cover such a range.
The talk would talk and go so far aslant.
You don't want madhouse and the whole thing there.

Charles Madge

NO MORE FEVER

The Shield of Achilles, W. H. Auden. (Faber, 10/6.)

THERE is nothing in this collection to make anyone alter his view of the latter-day Auden. Whether you believe his last book of any interest was *Another Time* (1940), or whether you find his American output subtler, more mature and of deeper import than anything he produced before the war, the poems offered here will confirm you in your view. They carry straight on from *Nones*, and two poems from that volume are included among them. *The Shield of Achilles* is made up of fourteen unrelated pieces, flanked on one side by a sequence of seven poems on natural phenomena (*Mountains, Lakes, Water* and so on — each of them 'for' someone), and on the other by seven more entitled *Horae Canonicae* (*Prime, Terce, Sext* and the rest), a group suggesting loosely that the 'hours' in question are of the day of the Crucifixion.

The astute reader will suspect from this outline alone that the pressure of poetic energy in the book is low, and he will be right. Although in theory a set of seven poems entitled *Mountains, Lakes, Water*, and so on (each of them 'for' someone) has as good a chance of success as any seven poems conceived and executed separately, in fact it is more likely to mean that the poet was outside the compulsion necessary for poetic success and was free to choose a smart frame for some poems he thought it might be rather nice to write. At any rate, that is what I feel has happened here. The *Bucolics*, as this group is called, bear all the marks of having been written in despite of something more important.

They are garrulous, ingenious, playful-sentimental, and get nowhere. In addition, they are phrased in the kind of no-style that was a feature of *Nones*:

> Romance? Not in this weather. Ovid's charmer
> Who leads the quadrilles in Arcady, boy-lord
> Of hearts who can call their Yes and No their own,
> Would, madcap that he is, soon die of cold or sunstroke:
> These lives are in firmer hands; that old grim She
> Who makes the blind dates for the hatless genera
> Creates their country matters. (Woe to the childbed,
> Woe to the strawberries if She's in Her moods!)

What chance has this wilful jumble of modes of any aesthetic coherence or effect? It would not be so irritating if the characteristics so jumbled were admirable in themselves. But they are not. Far too noticeable is a kind of lisping archness that sets the teeth on edge:

> Five minutes on even the nicest mountain
> Is awfully long.
>
> (*Mountains*)

And:

> Moraine, pot, oxbow, glint, sink, crater, piedmont, dimple . . . ?
> Just reeling off their names is ever so comfy.
>
> (*Lakes*)

And what has happened to the 'light manner', the legacy of Byron and Praed, by which Auden once set such store? The lightness nowadays is of wastepaper rather than light metal:

> How fascinating is that class
> Whose only member is Me!
> Sappho, Tiberius and I
> Hold forth beside the sea.
>
> (*Islands*)

These faults are less apparent in the second set, the *Horae*, but there is no gain in precise incontrovertibility: the tone never rises above a well-bred neo- (and sub-) Eliotese:

> We shall always now be aware
> Of the deed into which they lead, under
> The mock chase and mock capture,
> The racing and tussling and splashing,
> The panting and the laughter,
> Be listening for the cry and stillness
> To follow after: wherever
> The sun shines, brooks run, books are written,
> There will also be this death.
>
> (*Nones*)

Much of this section is very good reading, as an essay might be very good reading (in particular, *Sext*); some, even, moderately amusing (in

particular, *Vespers*), but when a poet, calling himself a Christian, elects to write on such a theme I think we have a right to expect a more significant conclusion than the pious coronal of hopefulness put forward in terms so conventional as to be meaningless:

> . . . That we, too, may come to the picnic
> With nothing to hide, join the dance
> As it moves in perichoresis,
> Turns about the abiding tree.

There is not much comfort to be taken from the middle group of individual poems which, according to my theory, might have been expected to redeem the mediocrity which surrounds them. *The Willow-Wren and the Stare* is a promising idea, but again the no-style — a kind of mixture of Age-of-Plastic nursery-rhyme, ballet folk-lore, and Hollywood Lemprière — prevents its complete realisation. *'The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning'* is a joking guide to the writing of good poetry:

> Be subtle, various, ornamental, clever,
> And do not listen to those critics ever
> Whose crude provincial gullets crave in books
> Plain cooking made still plainer by plain cooks . . .

and reiterates Auden's often-expressed belief that poetry is 'the luck of verbal playing', which is I suppose the opposite taste. *Ode to Gaea* starts finely, with a hint of the old Auden sweeping range:

> Leaves by the mile hide tons of
> Pied pebbles that will soon be birds . . .

and would be impressive if this level was sustained, but all too soon it declines to the non-serious status of 'But who on Cupid's coming would care to bet?', a poetry written it seems by someone no longer capable of strong feeling, or of conveying strong feeling in poetry, or of thinking that it matters whether it is conveyed or not, since poetry is all luck anyway.

Since Auden has apparently settled into this mode for good, I think it is unlikely that he will produce anything more of interest. It is a sad occasion when this is said of any writer, and especially so in the case of one who meant so much to his younger contemporaries, and was instrumental in bringing so many of them to the practice of reading and writing poetry: but then so has the deterioration been sad, from the powerfully-suggestive, elliptic originality of 1930 to the silly verbose stew of the present day. It leads one to wonder whether one's evaluation of Auden in the old days was at fault, and looking back one does indeed feel that he was not all that was claimed for him, even in the 'thirties: his talents were for mimicry and synthesis, creating only the appearance of intelligence and knowledge; his ideas of good and evil were crude and immature; in fact, his continual recourse in image and metaphor to the life of childhood suggested that his poetic personality had been arrested. Most of all, his work lacked, and still lacks, unsentimental unsmart charity.

On the other hand, the obscurity of his earlier poems does not in retrospect seem wilful or self-important mystification. The lines have an oblique potency, a strength drawn from the very fact that their meaning or relevance must not be made plain, like the utterances of the Saga heroes who so haunted Auden's youthful imagination:

> Go home, now, stranger, proud of your young stock,
> Stranger, turn back again, frustrate and vexed:
> This land, cut off, will not communicate,
> Be no accessory content to one
> Aimless for faces rather there than here.
> Beams from your car may cross a bedroom wall,
> They wake no sleeper . . .

Auden's prime gift was his tremendous power to convince. He had the talent for finding images, rhythms and phrases that completely won the reader's confidence, no matter how little was otherwise conceded; he had the knack of writing lines that seemed to embody the precisest expression of the most important matter, however unsusceptible to paraphrase:

> Then lightly, my darling, leave me and slip away
> Playfully, betraying him nothing, allaying suspicion:
> His eye is on all these people about us, leading
> Their quiet horrified lives,
> But if we can trust we are free.
> Though alone among those
> Who within earshot of the ungovernable sea
> Grow set in their ways.

It was a talent which enabled him to produce passages of mesmeric beauty, as if he were simply transcribing a seamless vision:

> The Summer holds: upon its glittering lake
> Lie Europe and the islands; many rivers
> Wrinkling its surface like a ploughman's palm.
> Under the bellies of the grazing horses
> On the far side of posts and bridges
> The vigorous shadows dwindle; nothing wavers.
> Calm at this moment the Dutch sea so shallow
> That sunk St. Pauls would ever show its golden cross
> And still the deep water that divides us still from Norway . . .

and it is for such lines, rather than the more vigorous doctrinaire myth-making, that we most regret his decline.

The reasons for this decline will no doubt be discussed for a long time yet, and we shall need to know much more about the nature of the poetic impulse before we can make a final judgment. The coincidence of its onset, however, with Auden's departure for America simply cannot be ignored, even if we do not go as far as saying that nobody writes well away from home. I think, myself, that if I were analysing Auden's poetry

with a view to diagnosing its latter failure — and I do no more than throw this out as a hint — I should start from the fact that if one were to mark all the passages in his work that might be called *typical* Auden one would find that a surprisingly high proportion of them consist of direct or indirect expression of emotions connected with dread, guilt, disaster or disease. I need mention only a few instances:

> Holders of one position, wrong for years.
>
> In sanatoriums they laugh less and less,
> Less certain of cure; and the loud madman
> Sinks now into a more terrible calm.
>
> Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys . . .
>
> From gradual ruin spreading like a stain .

It does seem to me, therefore, that a great deal of Auden's 'inspiration' — and this applies equally to Christopher Isherwood, another regrettably-similar case — depended on continual contact with the atmosphere of pre-1939 Europe where these emotions were so prevalent, and I fancy that his decline as a poet dates from the time when he cut himself off not from England as such but from the insecurity that England represented. It is not for me to say in what sense America meant security to him, even if I knew the answer, but I do think that much of the low-pressure non-serious element in his present work is directly traceable to his change of country. In the best Auden, the pre-1939 Auden, we find, as he found in Spain, 'our fever's menacing shapes are precise and alive'. It may be, of course, that there is no more fever today in England, America, or anywhere else. In that case the decline was inevitable.

Philip Larkin

EBB TIDE
Poetry Book Society Choice

Moon's Farm, Herbert Read. (Faber, 10/6.)

Sir Herbert Read has numerous claims to distinction. He has established himself as a subtle and original critic of both poetry and painting. He has also published a number of books of verse. Unfortunately (or perhaps, fortunately) none of this guarantees him as a poet. Poetry, to take it at its lowest, is language which has been subjected to some sort of discipline — usually to a large number of disciplines at once, but at least to one. Yet Sir Herbert's 'poetry' conforms to disciplines of neither metre, imagery, form, nor anything else.

It is totally unmetrical, in any sense. The stale old gibe about certain verse being merely 'prose chopped-up', so almost always unjustified, is entirely appropriate here—

> The idea of God
> had not arisen from man's experience of the
> world

but had been an original intuition of the
mind
an idea divinely inspired
a glimpse of some transcendental realm
of being
where time does not exist,

gains nothing by being printed as verse, and loses whatever false pretensions are capable of losing for it; it is not a maliciously extracted example, but entirely typical of the title-poem *Moon's Farm.*

The imagery is chaotic, and 'unrealised', in the critical sense. An eight-line poem, *Song*, runs

So long my heart
This little polish'd ball of blood
Has throbbed in unison
With your immortal flood

That now if you should ebb
I'd stay my flow
And sink into the sterile sands
Beneath us bleak and low.

The 'little polish'd ball of blood' is nice: but it is not mere Philistine literalness to enquire how an 'immortal' flood could ebb; to point out that, if the flood is a sea, then it would in any case ebb twice daily; that if it is a lake, then the heart could not 'throb in unison' with it; that if it is a stream or river, then 'ebb' cannot be applied to it, and it would in any case be flowing over fertile mud, not 'sterile sands'. And that would by no means be the end of the awkward questions. It is surprising that Sir Herbert the critic allows Sir Herbert the poet to get away with it.

Lastly, there is admittedly a sort of poetry which, however much it may fail to obey disciplines, nevertheless earns the name by its concentration, its 'dehydration', of ordinary prose language. Alas! Sir Herbert's poetry seems to be, in the main, prose watered down. The hero of *Moon's Farm* itself (a radio-dialogue in 'verse') returns to his childhood home: 'You see; everything, yes everything is much smaller than I can remember. My childish eyes had magnified everything and now the world seems to have shrunk', he says, when his 'chopped-up prose' has been reassembled. Thundering flat platitudes of this sort, in the flattest of flat prose, are all very well for the 'radio-play' perhaps: but the Muse will not acknowledge them.

Ovid Topham

PREPARING THE PICNIC

Brides of Reason, Donald Davie. (Fantasy Press, 6/-.)

THE poets have been getting away with it too long of course — spread-eagling nothing in particular across too many pages, hiding behind a

word-entanglement robbed of its barb. We have been having, as someone said of Bohme, 'a kind of picnic in which the author supplies the words, and the readers the meaning'. Whatever the 'younger poets' might be up to, they are at least beginning to have to lend more of a hand in preparing the picnic. Donald Davie has been publicly trying to put some rhyme and reason into the poem for so long, that it comes as a shock — to this reviewer, who saw his first Davie poem in 1949 — to realise that this flimsy twenty-seven-poems-worth is Davie's first volume of poetry, especially when one remembers that Davie's influence, both as poet and critic, has already been considerable.

I doubt whether anyone could fail to be impressed by, if nothing else, Davie's control, even his self-conscious control. It is this grasp of his which makes him satirist, lyricist and occasional poet. He can get away with murder, because with him murder is a fine art.

> 'Cassandra,' he tells us, 'plays her frenzied part too well
> To be convincing in hysteria.'

Davie is his own physician and can rid himself of anything that might smack of hysteria. He realises, however, that 'a sweet disorder in the dress' helps, as Herrick tells, to make things more bewitching than 'when art / is too precise in every part'.

It is precisely these — the sureness and the unexpectedly erring-human touch — that help me to forgive Davie's 'intellectualist' tendencies. He gets his pre-occupations across because he sounds as if he *means* it, and is so adept at it, as for example in a stanza like this one from *Twilight on the Waste Lands*:

> Conceive of such a poem, planned
> With such a nicety of touch
> It quite conceals the maker's hand
> And seems a votive fragment, such
> As patient scholars make unclear
> And, hazarding their guesses, fear
> They have read into it too much.

I can here merely assert that I think it an advantage to have a poet who can talk like that.

Listen to his first and last lines! He starts and breaks clean, building up surely to the snap ending. He leads you to expect something, and doesn't disappoint. Perhaps this is why, the longer he gets, the less I like him: most of these poems are under six stanzas, and I prefer Davie that way.

In a review of this length I'm prepared to forget that I think some of the poems inexcusable (e.g., *Demi-Exile*) and some of the saying not worth it. I'm prepared to sit on the fence about much I don't understand and don't take to on a review-reading. Looking from Davie to many a post-war volume, however, I find that where he brings his child up wrongly, they killed theirs with neglect. I'm sure this volume will get dirty with finger-marks, not dust.

The picnic may not be all that lively, but I'm prepared to go on it. And enjoy it.

Harold Silver

ARENA

A Literary Magazine

Edited by N. F. HOGGARD

Contributors include: Louis Johnson, Kendrick Smithyman, Gloria Rawlinson, Philip Mincher, Robert Thompson, Roderick Finlayson, Marie Insley, Henry Brennan, Eve Langley, Dennis McEldowney, Victor O'Leary, O. E. Middleton, A. E. Batistich, W. Hart-Smith, Charles Doyle, Philip H. Nielsen, John Barron Mays, Eric Nixon, Howard Sergeant, Lawrence Lipton, William Hull, Philip Murray, Charles E. Eaton, and James Boyer May.

Subscription rates: 7/6, for four issues.
All communications to:

P.O. Box 6188, Te Aro,
Wellington, New Zealand

THE LESS DECEIVED

Poems

by

PHILIP LARKIN

43 *pp.* *Demy 8vo* 6/- *net*

THIRD EDITION

'. . . in my opinion, *The Less Deceived* establishes him as not only the best of the younger English poets, but many times over the best.' John Wain, *New Poetry*, Third Programme.

THE MARVELL PRESS
253 Hull Road
Hessle
East Yorkshire

THE MINUTE

and

Longer Poems

by

JOHN HOLLOWAY

10/6 *net*

70 pp. *Cloth-bound* *Demy 8vo*

will be published in November, 1956, by

THE MARVELL PRESS

PRINTED AT THE PRESS OF VILLIERS PUBLICATIONS